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ABSTRACT

Meetings are an integral and time consuming part of almost everyone's life. Meetings can become a vital form of communication and interaction, and thus become an important and useful management tool if they are carefully planned, conducted, and followed up. Specific ways of conducting meetings, such as the Nominal Group Technique, the Interaction Method, and the Delphi Method, can be used to encourage maximum input without threatening participants, thereby creating a meeting situation in which all feel they have succeeded or won through consensus. (Author/PGD)

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MEETINGS-A VITAL MANAGEMENT TOOL

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ABSTRACT

Meetings are an integral and time consuming part of almost everyone's life. By attending to plans made prior to and after the meetings, meetings can become a vital form of communication and interaction and thus become an important and useful management tool. Specific ways of conducting meetings such as the Nominal Group Technique, the Interaction Method and the Delphi Method are techniques used to provide maximum and non threatening participant imput thus creating a meeting situation where all feel as though they have succeeded or won through consensus.

MEETINGS - A VITAL MANAGEMENT TOOL

I. Introduction

Most people spend an average of 4 hours per week in meetings. This computes into over 9,000 hours in a lifetime! From PTA, labor unions and church to business meetings most of us are involved in meetings. More than 11 million meetings per day are held in the United States alone. Therefore, most people have a stake in attending meetings designed so as to not waste their time. The use of "good" meetings aids effective communication within the modern organization and is really used as a form of fundamental communication. (Auger, 1972)

Meetings can be defined as "any group interacting with regard to a common, explicit purpose." (Tasklanganos, 1975) The overall goal of meetings is to increase the effectiveness of those attending for themselves, or the organization. Meetings provide a place to inform and teach members and build cohesiveness and tradition. Meetings can provide channels for upward communication that aids in solving problems and developing policy. Indeed many managers feel that there is "no more vital a management tool than that of the properly planned and executed business meeting." (Auger 1972)

The purpose of this paper is to look at several types of efficient business meetings that facilitate communication. Details needed to be made in planning effective business meetings are then outlined. Also,

the role of both the meeting leader and meeting participant is analyzed. Finally, three specific ways of conducting meetings, the Nominal Group Technique, Delphi Technique and the Interaction Method, are described.

II. Types of Meetings

The purpose of business meetings vary i.e., different types can be used to inform/report, to instruct, to define/plan, to clarify, to create, and to resolve/decide.* (La Sota, 1975) Meetings can also be classified according to frequency - weekly, daily, annual, ad hoc etc. Decision processes such as general consensus or voting to the chair can also be used to decern types of meetings.

Ernest and Mary Borman in their book, Effective Small Group Communication depict types or kinds of meetings as:

1. The Ritualistic Meeting - Ritual meetings may be "rubber stamp" meetings but usually aid cohesiveness and assure authority figures that they still have clout.

2. The Briefing Meeting - The briefing session is used to spell out who does what, when, and where.

3. The Instructional Meeting - The purpose of the instructional meeting is to teach participants.

4. The Consultative Meeting - In a meeting arranged for consultation, the leader/manager calls for imput and advice and then makes a decision.

5. The Decision-Making Meeting - The meeting designed for decision-making is the highest level or most difficult type of meeting. It is designed to allow decisions to emerge and courses of action to be formulated.

*As you decend this list the number of meeting participants would tend to decrease.

The type of meeting held is most important to understanding for both the planner and participant. The meeting planner must be able to clarify the meeting type to afford the participants additional knowledge about the meeting's purpose (to instruct, to decide, so forth) so as to ensure realistic expectations on the part of the participant

III. Planning the Meeting - Before and After

The decision to have a meeting must be the initial decision. A good rule to follow is to call a meeting when there is a specific, definable managerial purpose such as:

- to define organizational goals
- to give information (to brief)
- to receive group judgement
- to dissect a problem
- to gain acceptance of a decision, change, etc.
- to train and teach
- to reconcile conflict
- to assure understanding
- to watch and/or develop future managers
- to gain immediate reaction and speedy response (Auger, 1972)

The meeting planner should ask, "Is the meeting really necessary?, Can I make the decision myself?, and Can the same results be gotten by mail?" (Lobingier, 1969)

Once the decision to have a meeting is made the meeting should be classified according to the meeting types discussed previously thus setting the tone of the meeting i.e., to brief, to decide etc. Then attend to the following:

1. Set specific objectives and expectations of the meeting.
2. Decide on size of the meeting* and the extent of involvement desired of participants. Additionally decide who should be

*The ideal meeting size is between 5-7 and should never exceed 10 participants.

included.

3. Coordinate logistics such as date, time, time frame, place and physical arrangements of the meeting room.

4. Prepare or arrange for presentation to be made, including plans for audio visuals to be utilized.

5. Determine breaks, if any.

6. Make arrangements for record taking if minutes are desired.

7. Depict leader and their desired role.

8. Decide on method of meeting conduction (parlimentary, interactive, etc.)

9. Formulate the agenda which includes: specific order of meeting discussion and time alloted for each agenda item, participants name, date, time, place of meeting and name of chair. Circulate agenda and any background or proposition papers two or three days in advance. It may prove helpful to divide the agenda item into three categories; for information, for discussion, for decision. (Doyle, 1978)

10. Make plans for a meeting evaluation. The evaluation should usually include the following questions:

    - preparation adequate?
    - purpose clear?
    - social climate suitable?
    - agenda followed?
    - conclusion(s) reached?
    - leader appropriate?
    - follow-up plan(s) made?
    - logistics available?
    - name three things that can be done to improve the meeting (Bormann, 1972)

11. Make plans for the follow-up. Follow-up should include phone calls or visits to remind persons designated as responsible of their depicted duties. The follow-up should also include basic details of the next meeting. (Joy, 1976)

John Lobingier in his book, Business Meetings That Make Meetings Work depicts five basic steps in planning a meeting:

1. Decide upon types of meeting needed to accomplish desired objectives and results.

2. Decide upon participants needed and analyze the group.

3. Plan meeting content in keeping with set objectives and member type.

4. Plan logistics (who, what, where, when)

5. Plan follow-up and evaluation.

IV. The Role of Meeting Members

A. The Role of the Leader

A meeting leader holds a most difficult and varied role. The leader can take the role of a summarizer, task setter, traffic cop, gate opener, mediator, decision maker or decision announcer. (La Sota, 1975) Whatever specific role the meeting leader assumes the most commonly understood purpose of the leader is to encourage discussion. A good leader will draw out the silent members, protect the vulnerable participants, occasionally encourage clashes and halt domination by one participant if it occurs. Also, the leader must have the ability:

- to listen actively
- to use humor
- to interrupt
- to keep ideas flowing
- to maintain pace and spirit
- to combat indifference
- to handle controversy
- to reach consensus (Lobingier, 1969)

The greatest single barrier to success for a meeting leader is self indulgence. The leader is the meetings servant rather than master. If he/she wants a point emphasized, a wise meeting leader will find someone else to exert influence on the group.

B. The Role of the Participant

The participant's role is one of devotion to the task. The participant needs to see him/her self as part of a team. It is most important for the participant to be prepared for the meeting by reading assigned papers, the agenda, bringing needed materials,

so forth. An ideal participant would avoid springing surprises and provoking controversy during the meetings. In most cases the participant should take notes. (Delbecq, 1975)

V. The Win/Win Methods of Conducting Meetings

The way organizations choose to make decisions has a significant impact on the quality of decisions and group survival. Many key decisions are made in meetings. Meetings can decide to do nothing by postponing decisions. This represents a lose/lose situation. Consensus decision making (not compromise) is a win/win situation for all involved.

Within the last 25 years three specific ways of conducting meetings have emerged whose main purpose is to reach a consensus or provide a win/win decision making situation. These three methods are the Nominal Group Technique, the Interaction Method and the Delphi Method. Each are discussed separately below.

A. The Nominal Group Technique (NGT)

Nominal Group Technique was designed by Andre Delbecq and Andrew Van De Vin in 1968. It is a structured group meeting which proceeds along the following steps:

Step 1: Within a time frame, usually 5 to 15 minutes, a group of from 5-7 people are asked to silently and individually generate their ideas, in writing, to the stated question. The question to be considered is given to the participants both orally and in writing.

Step 2: Each participant is asked to share, in brief phrases, one of their ideas. This is done in round-robin fashion until all participants have exhausted their list. Here one person, the recorder, records on a flip chart that can be seen by all members, the ideas shared. There is still no discussion at this point.

Step 3: Serial discussion of the recorded ideas, for the purposes of clarification, then takes place.

Step 4: Preliminary vote - participants then independently vote on the ideas. The group decision is mathematically derived through rank-ordering or rating of the individuals vote.

Where increased judgemental accuracy is desired, two additional steps can be added:

Step 5: Discuss preliminary vote to allow examination of skewed voting patterns and provide opportunity to rediscuss items so as to gain additional information.

Step 6: Final Vote (repeat Step 4) (Delbecq, 1975)

The N.G.T. offers:

1. Assurance of different process for each phase of creativity.*

2. Mathematical voting technique to arrive at group judgement. (Delbecq, 1975)

B. The Interaction Method

The Interaction Method relies on four well-defined roles which form a check and balance system on one another. The four key people are:

1. The Facilitator - The facilitator is concerned with the process, not power of the meeting. He/she is trained to act neutral and non evaluative. The facilitator keeps the ideas flowing and protects all praticipants while trying to get them involved. It is his/her responsibility for pre and post meeting plans. The group should not allow the facilitator to influence, thus providing a system of checks and balances.

2. The Recorder - The recorder is also trained to remain neutral and non-judgemental. Further, he/she is trained to serve the group by producing clear, legible records which captures the main ideas of the participants, while not editorializing. The record of the ideas is recorded on large sheets of paper

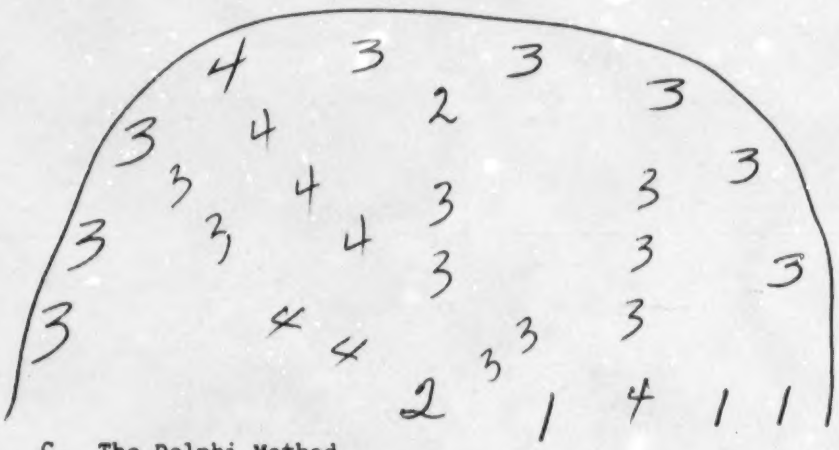
*Research suggests that there are two phases in creative problem solving; fact-finding and evaluation. Research further suggests that the two phases require distinct activities, roles and process. NGT meets this requirement. (Delbecq, 1975)

in front of the participants. The record itself is known as "group memory." The participants again check the recorder during the process for acceptable phrasing etc.

3. The Group Member - The group member is an active participant who is devoted to the task. The group member is responsible for keeping both the facilitator and recorder neutral.

4. Manager/Chairperson - The manager is another participant and does not run the meeting, the facilitator does. The facilitator is charged with keeping the manager, like other participants, on the meeting objectives. (Doyle, 1978)

The seating arrangement for the Interaction Method of running a meeting usually look like this:



C. The Delphi Method

This is the most different of all methods described here because this meeting method does not require that the participants meet face to face. The Delphi Technique, designed by N.C. Dalkey and his associates of the Rand Corporation in 1950 is a

> Method of systematic solicitation and collations of judgements on a particular topic through a set of carefully designed sequential questionnaires interspersed with summarized information and feedback of opinions derived from earlier responses. (Delbecq, 1975)

What is needed for the Delphi Method is three separate groups of individuals to perform the following different roles:

1. Decision-makers - The person(s) which desire/expect some sort of product from the exercise or meeting.

2. Staff group - The people that design and mail the initial and follow-up questionnaire and summarize results.

3. Respondents - The group whose judgements are desired and thus polled through the questionnaire i.e., the participants in the "meeting." (Delbecq 1975)

VI. Conclusion

Meetings are an integral and time consuming part of almost everyone's life. Comprehensive meeting planning is paramount to aid effective communication and responsible results. Both the meeting leader and the meeting participant are responsible for assuming their proper roles in a prepared fashion.

Meetings can be conducted to gain consensus in decision making by soliciting equal imput from all in a non threatening atmosphere. Nominal Group Technique, Interaction Method and the Delphi Method are each techniques in conducting meetings which offer a way of reaching group consensus or producing a win/win situation.

In deciding when to call a meeting, planning a meeting and choosing a method of conducting a meeting, a wise business manager can foresee that meetings can truly be a vital management tool.

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